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Revision

The Cold War

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Consider the following question on the topic of the Soviet Union's role in the start of the Cold War, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

To what extent was the Soviet Union to blame for the start of the Cold War in the period to 1946?

Student answer with commentary

Ideological differences and tensions during the Second World War between the East and West suggest that it was hardly surprising that the wartime alliance soon collapsed, and a Cold War between the two superpowers developed. It was only a common enemy, in Nazi Germany, that had brought the East and West together and once Germany was defeated in 1945, there was little to keep the two sides together. There were ideological divisions, differences over policy and divisions over military developments and events in Eastern Europe. How far the Soviet Union was responsible for the breakdown of the wartime alliance is a matter of debate as the USA also played a significant role, particularly with its distrust of the Soviet Union and the development of the atom bomb.

A clear, balanced view is offered and the developments are placed in the wider context of wartime events and the context of longer term tensions. The opening raises a number of issues, which a strong answer will then develop during the main body of the essay. It is encouraging that rather than simply focusing on the causes of the Cold War, the response does consider the issue of blame as the question requires.

The actions of both sides during the Second World War were a cause of tension. The USSR believed that the delay by the Western powers in launching the Second Front was a deliberate attempt to weaken it and ensure it faced the full force of the Nazi military machine. However, in this instance there were valid reasons for the delay so that sufficiently large-scale force could be built up for the invasion. It should also be remembered that the West sent a great deal of military supplies via the dangerous Arctic route. On the other hand, Soviet treatment of non-communists in Poland, firstly with the Katyn massacres and later with Stalin's lack of support for the Warsaw rising, followed by the arrest of the sixteen London Poles in 1945, convinced the West that he could not be trusted. Although the West gave the impression of not fully supporting the Soviet Union in its struggle, it was the Soviet actions, particularly in Poland, that played a significant role in the creation of distrust and subsequent Cold War.

A balanced discussion continues with consideration of the importance of the events of the Second World War. The argument is well-supported with detailed, accurate and relevant knowledge. The response does consider both sides of the argument and then reaches an interim judgement as to who was responsible — such interim judgements are a feature of the higher levels.

Ideologically the West and East have to share responsibility for the Cold War. Marxism preached that communism and capitalism would clash and predicted a world-wide revolution. This was promoted by the Soviets who established the Communist international, or COMINTERN, in 1919 to promote such an idea, although it should be remembered that this was dissolved in 1943. With the Soviets seeking to spread their ideology and the West concerned by this threat, it is hardly surprising that it created tensions even before 1946. On the other hand, the USA feared a return to the depression of the 1930s when the war was over. However, they believed that this could be avoided if a global capitalist system was created with countries trading with each other. This therefore meant that the number of states that became communist had to be restricted and also explains why America was determined to get the German economy back working as quickly as possible.

A clear view as to who was to blame ideologically is given at the very start of the paragraph. This is clearly explained and developed. It is well-supported once again by precise examples from both sides of the Cold War. However, the response would benefit from a concluding sentence which reinforces the suggested view made in the opening sentence.

In military terms both the Soviet Union and the USA must share blame for the start of the Cold War. Not only were the countries liberated by the Soviets in Eastern Europe forced to adopt communist regimes, even though these parties were not popular, but even with the ending of the war the Red Army did not go home but stationed some five million men in Eastern Europe to impose Soviet wishes. Similarly, the Soviets entered the war against Japan in August 1945 to try and ensure that it occupied large parts of Manchuria and Korea. On the other hand, the military policies of the USA played a critical role in bringing about the Cold War. The USA did not share the secrets of the atom bomb with its Soviet ally and with access to the most powerful weapon in the world, was willing to use it to impose its will and under Truman followed a staunch anti-communist and 'get tough' policy, in contrast to that pursued by Roosevelt. It would therefore appear that the USA must take a great deal of responsibility for the difficulties created by military developments as the monopoly of atomic weapons was of particular concern to the Soviets as it increased their vulnerability. It could even be argued that the USA desired a conflict with the Soviet Union as it would allow full defence spending in the USA to remain high, and keep the economy close to full employment.

Once again, the opening sentence offers a view as to who was responsible militarily for the Cold War. As with previous paragraphs, the argument is well-supported and uses a range of relevant examples to back up the claims made. This time a judgement is reached and it does challenge the suggestion made in the opening sentence, but it is explained and supported, making it convincing and not simply an assertion.

The policies followed by both sides were also important in causing the Cold War. Stalin caused alarm in the West as he did not implement the agreements put in place at Yalta with regards to Poland and then failed to honour the agreement made at Potsdam to treat Germany as a single economic unit. Instead he took as many assets as possible from East Germany, creating a clear sense that they could not be trusted. However, once Stalin had achieved a buffer zone between the West and Russia, he largely kept to the agreements made at Yalta and Potsdam and withdrew Soviet forces into their German zone and allowed the Western powers to occupy their zone in Berlin. Therefore, although the Soviets were not always trustworthy they did largely keep to their agreements and, at least in part, the Cold War may have developed more because Truman was unable to understand why Stalin wanted security, failing to grasp the psychological impact of the twenty million Russians killed fighting the Germans.

A further factor, namely the policies of the two sides is considered. The response does not fall into the trap of going beyond the date in the question and writing about Marshall Aid and the Truman Plan or support for communist regimes. As with previous paragraphs, the discussion is balanced, and again precise and relevant examples are provided. In particular, there is a balanced discussion of Soviet policies in Eastern Europe, an issue that many responses would neglect. The answer shows a good grasp of the importance of perception on both sides and uses this to reach a balanced judgement.

Both Stalin and Truman took a firm line in their dealings, believing that force was the only thing the other understood. Although many events increased the tensions between the two powers, it was the long-term causes, particularly the difference in ideology and the fear from the USA of the spread of communism and the belief of Stalin and Russia that the West wanted to destroy it, that provided the basis for the Cold War. Neither side was solely to blame — the Cold War developed because of the mistrust that already existed between the two sides and the inability or unwillingness of one to understand the perceptions of the other.

The conclusion does pick up on the view offered in the opening paragraph and develops it to explain why long-term tensions were largely to blame. It explains clearly why neither side was solely to blame and picks up on the point made in the previous paragraph about perceptions. There has been a consistency of argument throughout and the response is clearly structured and balanced, taking it into the higher levels with a series of interim judgements and an overall judgement that follows from the main body of the response.

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